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ABSTRACT

The number of nontraditional families, including single-parent families and stepfamilies, in America has been steadily increasing. This study was conducted to examine the effects of family structure (intact, stepparent, and single-parent) on institutionalized children's self-concepts using Parish and Taylor's Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC). The PAIC and a demographic questionnaire were completed by 166 students in grades 5 through 12 who were residing in a state-operated children's home. Fifty-one students were from intact families, 54 were from stepfamilies, and 61 were from divorced-single parent families. No significant differences in self-concept scores by sex were found, although females from each family type scored higher than did male counterparts. A trend was noted for students from single-parent families to check fewer positive adjectives on the PAIC; their mean scores, however, did not differ significantly (.05 level) from the means of children from intact families or stepfamilies. Further analyses revealed that children from intact families were significantly more likely to describe themselves as happy, kind, and nice than were children from stepfamilies or from single-parent families. Children from stepfamilies were significantly more likely to describe themselves as brave, fairminded, honest, and wise than were children from either intact or single-parent families. (NB)

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The Effects of Family Structure on Institutionalized Children's Self-concepts

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of family structure (intact, stepparent, and single-parent) on children's self-concepts, using Parish & Taylor's Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC). One hundred and sixty-six (166) institutionalized children in grades five through twelve participated in the study. Although a trend was noted for students from single-parent families to check fewer positive adjectives, they did not differ significantly (.05 level) from the means of children from intact families or stepfamilies.

The Effects of Family Structure on Institutionalized Children's Self-concepts

Within the last decade, attention has been given to the growing phenomenon of single-parent and stepfamily (also known as blended, reconstituted, or nontraditional) life in American society. Projections indicate that the number of stepfamilies will continue to increase rapidly (Duberman, 1977). Nontraditional family life is now an integral part of American culture. Six and one-half million children (10.2% of children under 18 years of age) currently live in stepfamilies (Francke & Reese, 1980; Jacobson, 1980). It is obvious that stepfamilies are here to stay as an accepted form of American family life (Kompara, 1980).

Some research has noted that more difficulties exist for children living in nontraditional families than for children living with both biological parents. For example, in a survey in which teachers were asked to rate the behavior of children in kindergarten through eighth grade, children from reconstituted families were found to have more conduct problems than those children from intact homes (Touliatos & Lindholm, 1980). However, other reports (Santrock, Warshak, Lindbergh, & Meadows, 1982) suggested that the social behavior of children in stepfamilies was not necessarily more problematic than behavior of children from intact homes.

As a result of such contrary findings, interest in studying the impact of divorce and the ensuing restructuring of families on the self-concept of

children involved has increased in recent years (i.e., Hess & Camara, 1979; Parish & Parish, 1983; Raschke & Raschke, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Several researchers (i.e., Atkinson & Ogston ,1974; Hetherington, 1972; Kelly & Wallerstein,1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) have found that divorce negatively influences the self-concept of children.

Professionals have also been interested in developing various scales to measure self-concept. Parish and Taylor (1978a) developed the Personal Attribute Inventory for Children (PAIC) to measure the self-concept of children as related to family structure (intact, single-parent, or stepfamily). The PAIC has been used to measure variables involving the self-esteem of children from varying backgrounds. The focus of the PAIC is on children's emotional attitudes toward themselves.

Children from divorced, non-remarried families have been found to have lower self-concepts than children from intact families. Children from divorced, remarried families were also found to have lower self-concepts than children from intact families but higher self-concepts than those from divorced, non-remarried families (Parish & Taylor, 1979).

As stated earlier, not all studies support the premise that divorce constitutes negative impact on children's self-esteem. In a study of 289 children in grades three, six, and eight, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1969) was used to measure self-concept (Raschke & Raschke,1979). After finding no major differences in self-concept ratings between children from intact, single-parent, or reconstituted families, it was concluded that "children are not adversely affected by living in a single-parent family, but family conflict and/or parental unhappiness can be detrimental, at least to self-concept, which is

also a measure of social and personal adjustment" (p. 373). Likewise, Parish, Dostal, and Parish (1981) found no significant effect of family structure on the self-concept of children.

After reviewing current research regarding the impact of the reconstitution of family structure on the self-concepts of children and considering their own on-the-job observations, the authors of the current study became interested in investigating the impact of family structure on the self-concepts of children from institutionalized backgrounds. The research assumption was that children in institutionalized settings who came from intact families would have higher self-concepts, as measured by the PAIC, than children from either step- or single-parent families. A second question was whether or not children from divorced, single-parent families might have higher self-concepts than stepchildren.

Three of the four researchers are either parttime or fulltime employees at the children's home where this study took place. Many children residing there have adjusted reasonably well to divorce but are not able to withstand the second emotional/psychological shock of accepting a stepmother or stepfather. However, it must be realized that children residing at this treatment center are there primarily because they have not adjusted well to divorce, stepfamilies, or a myriad of other possible problems.

Method

Participants

A total of 166 children in grades five through twelve (80 males and 86 females) participated in this study. This sample included the total population in those grades at this self-contained school. All of these children were residing in a state-operated children's home in East Central

Indiana. Approximately half of these children were wards of the court; the other half were placed there by their parent(s) or guardian(s). The sample provided socioeconomic and geographical diversity from within the state. Of these 166 children, 51 were from intact families, 54 represented reconstituted families and 61 were from divorced-single parent families.

Instrument

The PAIC, developed by Parish and Taylor (1978a) was used to survey institutionalized children from intact, divorced, and step- families, regarding their self-concepts. The PAIC consists of 24 positive adjectives and 24 negative adjectives arranged alphabetically. Children are asked to choose 15 adjectives which best describe themselves.

Several studies have been conducted which offer support for the validity and reliability of this instrument as a self-concept measure (i.e., Nunn, Parish, & Worthing, 1983; Parish & Eads, 1977; Parish & Taylor, 1978a & 1978b;). Self-concept, as defined by these studies, as well as by the current study, is defined as "an attitude toward one's self" (Parish & Taylor, 1978b, p. 1227).

In one of these studies (Parish & Taylor, 1978a), the PAIC and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (CSCS) were administered to third and sixth graders. A correlation of .67 ($p < .001$) was found between these two scales. The PAIC alone, after a four-week delay, showed a test-retest reliability coefficient of .73 ($p < .001$).

In a related study, Parish and Taylor (1978b) tested the PAIC with the CSCS as the criterion variable. In this study a much larger sample size was employed. Again, responses on the PAIC were significantly correlated with the CSCS ($r = .32$, $p < .001$). The PAIC showed a test-retest reliability

coefficient of .88 ($p < .001$)

In addition to these studies, Nunn and Parish (1983) reported that "the respondents' scores on the PAIC were found to be significantly correlated ($p < .0001$) with their scores on the two subscales of the STAIC [State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Children] as well as with the three subscales of the BRPSS [Behavior Rating Profile-Student Scales]" (p. 221). The PAIC appears to be substantially supported as both a valid and reliable instrument as a measure of children's self-concepts.

Parish, Dostal, and Parish (1981) had previously established a delineation of "happy" and "unhappy" through the application of cutoff scores on this instrument. A family score of 13-15 positive adjectives checked as descriptive of one's family was used to determine a high family-concept or a "happy" family situation. A family-concept score of 12 or less was deemed to determine a low family-concept score or an "unhappy" family situation. Similar cutoff scores were also used to determine high or low self-concepts of children in the current study.

Procedure

Participants were tested in groups of 15-20 individuals. Each student was informed of the purpose and nature of the study and read and signed a letter of informed consent. They were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Participants taking part in the study were given a demographic questionnaire from which information regarding the family structure was obtained. Initial instructions explaining the basic guidelines for completing the demographic questionnaire and the PAIC were read to the participants. The data gathering procedure took approximately 25-35 minutes to complete.

Results

An initial analysis, which summed the number of positive adjectives checked by male and female children from each of the three family types as well as the summed scores by sex, was conducted in order to check for an overall main effect due to family type and/or sex by positive self-concept score. While the scores by family type proved to be in the generally predicted direction (i.e., highest mean score of 12.19 was recorded by children from intact families), the lowest self-concept mean score (11.26) was recorded by children from divorced single-parent families rather than by children from stepfamilies (11.87). However, the differences were not statistically significant at the .05 level of confidence. No significant differences in self-concept scores by sex were found. However, females from each family type scored higher than did their male counterparts. Mean self-concept scores for female children from intact, blended, and single-parent families were 12.67, 11.96, and 11.68 respectively. Mean self-concept scores for male children from intact, blended, and single-parent families were 11.94, 11.52, and 11.18 respectively.

The wide range of scores in this initial analysis encouraged the authors to further pursue the data for differences regarding individual adjectives selected by children from the three family types studied. To accomplish this, chi-square analyses were done. The results of this analysis as well as the percentage of children from each family type who checked the various adjectives is presented in Table 1.

Insert table 1 about here

The chi-square analysis revealed that children from intact families were significantly more likely to describe themselves as **happy** ($x^2 = 9.87$, $p < .01$), **kind** ($x^2 = 6.04$, $p < .05$), and **nice** ($x^2 = 9.41$, $p < .01$) than were children from stepfamilies or from divorced single-parent families. Children from blended families were significantly more likely to describe themselves as **brave** ($x^2 = 6.84$, $p < .05$), **fairminded** ($x^2 = 6.81$, $p < .03$), **honest** ($x^2 = 7.74$, $p. < .02$), and **wise** ($x_2 = 7.29$, $p < .02$) than were the children from either intact or divorced single-parent families.

Discussion/Implications

Self-concept is generally considered a good index of one's mental health (Kappes, 1980). Self-concept, as a gauge of how children are adjusting socially and emotionally to divorce or stepparenting, has sometimes been found to vary under specific circumstances of family structure (i.e., intact, divorced, blended) (Parish & Taylor, 1979). Other researchers (Parish, et al., 1981; Raschke & Raschke, 1979), however, found no significant effect of family structure on children's self-concepts.

Findings of the current study (conducted in an institutional setting), in addition to being similar to results reported by Raschke and Raschke (1979) and Parish et al. (1981), are in concert also with an identical study (Johnson & Hutchinson, 1987) using a non-institutionalized population of children of similar ages and backgrounds. Although a trend was found in these studies indicating that children from stepfamilies and children from divorced families may have slightly lower self-concepts than children from intact families, a statistically significant difference was not found.

Historically, the intact, nuclear family has supported our values structure in society-at-large. However, caution is warranted in viewing the

single-parent or blended family as universally pathological or somehow less functional than the family in which mother and father have sustained an intact family structure. Some researchers (i.e., Kurdak & Siesky, 1978) suggest that, although divorce can lead to different patterns of development in those children affected, disturbed patterns do not necessarily evolve.

Perhaps Bilge and Kaufman (1983) best summarize the results of this study. They note that the well-being of children in society can best be assessed by the adequacy of the nurturing, love, and training they receive in preparation of the roles they must play as adults rather than by particular family structures (i.e, intact, single, blended) in which they must reside.

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Table 1

Percent of Children Who Chose Each Adjective on the PAIC

Adjectives	Family Type		
	Intact (n = 51)	Blended (n = 54)	Single Parent (n = 61)
Afraid	27.5	22.2	39.3
Angry	13.7	25.9	19.7
Awkward	11.8	9.3	13.1
Bad	5.9	14.8	14.8
Beautiful	21.6	14.8	19.7
Bitter	7.8	9.3	13.1
Brave	47.1	70.0*	50.8
Calm	59.8	38.9	49.2
Careless	21.6	18.5	14.8
Cheerful	58.8	46.3	59.3
Complaining	21.6	16.7	27.9
Cowardly	2.0	3.7	8.2
Cruel	3.9	13.0	11.5
Dirty	2.0	0.0	3.3
Dumb	7.8	2.0	6.6
Fairminded	25.5	50.0**	39.3
Foolish	9.8	14.8	11.5
Friendly	92.2	90.7	86.9
Gentle	56.9	55.6	54.1
Gloomy	7.8	9.6	18.0
Good	66.7	46.3	49.2
Great	27.5	20.4	18.0
Greedy	5.9	13.0	18.0
Handsome	27.5	33.3	36.1
Happy	80.4****	59.3	52.5

(Table 1 continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Percent of Children Who Chose Each Adjective on the PAIC

Adjectives	Family Type		
	Intact (n = 51)	Blended (n = 54)	Single Parent (n = 61)
Healthy	72.6	70.4	75.4
Helpful	84.3	74.1	85.3
Honest	68.6	80.5***	57.4
Jolly	11.8	13.0	16.4
Kind	76.5*	57.4	55.7
Lazy	21.6	42.6	36.1
Lovely	25.5	24.1	18.0
Mean	7.8	13.0	13.1
Nagging	5.9	11.1	14.8
Nice	78.4****	66.7	50.8
Polite	60.8	68.5	68.9
Pretty	39.2	27.8	34.4
Rude	9.8	13.0	13.1
Selfish	7.8	3.7	13.1
Show-off	9.8	29.6	26.2
Strong	35.3	44.4	44.3
Sweet	58.8	46.3	50.8
Ugly	17.8	11.1	9.8
Unfriendly	7.8	1.9	3.3
Weak	15.7	7.4	8.2
Wise	31.8	57.4***	42.6
Wonderful	35.3	29.6	27.9
Wrongful	5.9	3.7	0.0

****χ^2 = p < .01 **χ^2 = p < .03

***χ^2 = p < .02 *χ^2 = p < .05